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Managing psychosocial wellbeing for libraries

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2024 STATE LIBRARY QUEENSLAND / QUEENSLAND PUBLIC LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION LIBRARY LEADERS PROGRAM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the author 2

Disclaimer 2

Introduction 3

How to use this guide 3

Psychosocial obligations on one page 4

Overview 5

- What are psychosocial hazards? 5
- Key indicators of stress 6
- The legislation 7
- Statutory obligations 7
- Common law 11
- Consequences of noncompliance 11

Library Specific Psychosocial Hazards 12

- High/low job demands 12
- Vicarious trauma 16
- Vocational awe and mission creep 20
- Violence, abuse and sexual harassment 23

Links and resources 29

References 30

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Sarah gravitated towards the Information Sector after an initial career as a Liability and Aviation Insurance Lawyer. She holds a Bachelor of Laws from Queensland University of Technology and a Master of Information Studies from Charles Sturt University.

After encountering two industries with their own unique but significant psychological stress, she developed an interest in researching and supporting the psychosocial wellbeing of library workers.

This resource was developed as part of the State Library Queensland and Queensland Public Libraries Association 2024 Library Leaders Program. The author chose to explore this topic to support workers and leaders understand their legislative obligations in relation to psychosocial wellbeing in a library environment.

Enormous thanks are owed to Linda Barron, Director of Information Services at State Library Queensland, (Sarah's mentor) for her guidance. Linda endeavoured to ensure that this project remained sensible, readable, relevant and on track, and she almost succeeded.

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DISCLAIMER

The information contained within this resource is:

- ⇒ *Intended to support library practitioners operating within Queensland, Australia. Whilst library workers from other locations may benefit from the content, please be aware that any references to legislation are only relevant to the Queensland jurisdiction.*
- ⇒ *Intended to be used as a guide only and should not be relied upon as legal advice. Please seek the advice of a qualified legal practitioner before forming any conclusions, especially with respect to legal exposure to risk.*
- ⇒ *Accurate at the time of posting (April 2025), however is highly variable and subject to change. Please review the accuracy and currency of any information before relying on it.*

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *'Managing psychosocial wellbeing in libraries Toolkit'*.

This resource exists to help you – the library worker or manager - understand the ecosystem of library psychological hazards, how to navigate them, and what your legal obligations are in Queensland.

Whilst safety has always been a priority amongst library managers, recent changes to legislation in Queensland have helped to raise the profile and significance of psychological wellbeing at work. The introduction of the Code of Practice titled *'Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022'* (hereafter referred to as "the Code of Practice") will undoubtedly have led some libraries to consider whether the steps they are taking are adequate to safeguard their workers from psychological risks and protect themselves from exposure to legal consequences.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The objective of this guide is to collate, index and summarise all necessary information with respect to psychosocial hazards in libraries so that the information can be accessed in a moment of need.

It is intended that this resource provides a substantial overview of the unique context in which libraries operate and to assist library services to contemplate and plan for contingencies which may not yet have arisen. It is hoped that by learning about them, they may be avoided at your workplace.

Please familiarise yourself with the index. Whilst the entirety of the document might be considered useful, it is not intended that all pages of this document will be read.

What you will find in the following pages is an introductory overview of:

- ⇒ the definition of psychosocial hazards and risks;
- ⇒ the key pieces of legislation governing this topic;
- ⇒ the foundational obligations of an organisation to a worker, and the worker to the organisation;
- ⇒ consequences for noncompliance with the key pieces of legislation; and
- ⇒ an overview of the most common library psychosocial hazards, including initiatives that other organisations have introduced in an attempt to eliminate, substitute, isolate or engineer those hazards.

What you will not find in this resource is:

- ⇒ legal advice or guidance in relation to your organisation's individual circumstances. This guide is not intended to provide you with the guidance you need in order to make you own legal analysis. It is intended to help you understand what will be significant context for your legal team. In order to form a confident determination, please seek the advice of your organisation's legal counsel for any questions.

PSYCHOSOCIAL OBLIGATIONS ON ONE PAGE

Statutory obligation

A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) must:

Ensure the health and safety of workers while engaged in work (as far as is reasonably practicable). This includes providing a safe work environment, plant and structures, systems of work, adequate facilities, information, training and instruction and monitoring – s 19 *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld).

Manage psychosocial risks, in line with the risk management requirements contained in the below graph – s 55C *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).

04
Maintain control measures
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 37.
03
Eliminate risks
(or minimise where elimination is not possible)
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 35.
05
Review and revise control measures
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 38.
02
Manage psychosocial risks
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 55C.
06
Provide information, training, instruction and supervision
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 39.
Ensure the health and safety of workers
Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld), s 19.
01
Identify risks
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 34.
07
Consult with workers at every step
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 47.

Common law obligation

Employers also have a duty under common law to take all reasonable steps to provide employees with a safe system of work (*Mount Isa Mines Ltd v Pusey* [1970] HCA 60).

This duty is embedded in the common law principles of negligence and has been developed and refined through various court decisions over time. Landmark cases, such as *Wyong Shire Council v Shirt* [1980] HCA 12, and *Kondis v State Transport Authority* [1984] HCA 61 have played significant roles in shaping the landscape regarding employer responsibilities.

OVERVIEW

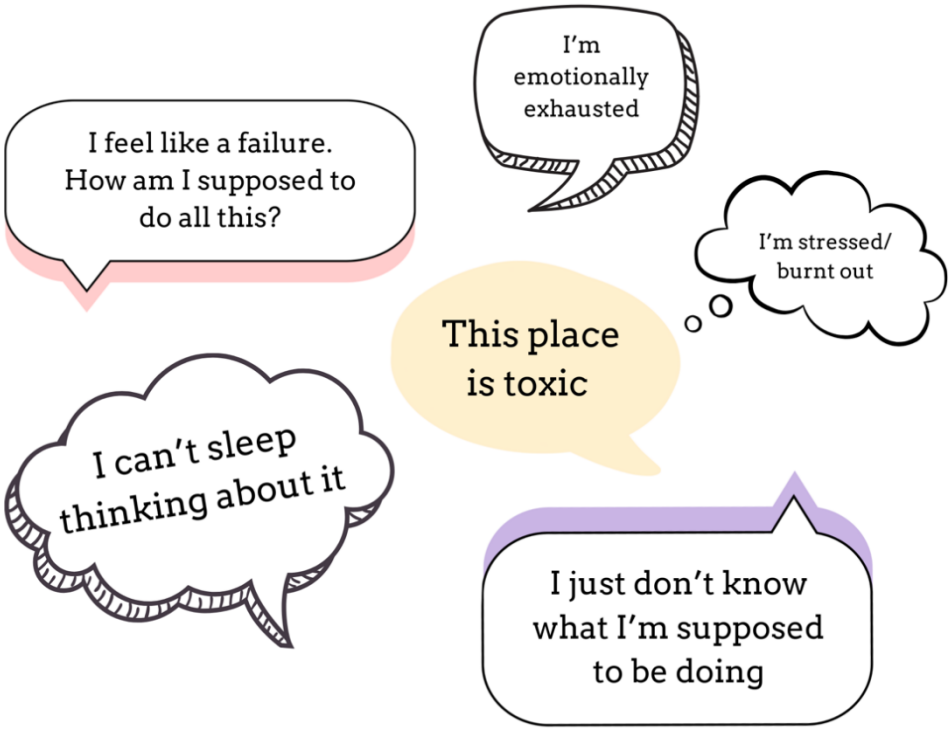
WHAT ARE PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS?

A psychosocial hazard is anything that poses a risk to psychological health (*Managing the Risk of Psychosocial hazards at Work 2022 Qld*, p. 5; *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 Qld*, s 55A). Queensland legislation further clarifies that the hazard may cause either psychological *or* physical harm and arises from:

- The design or management of work (*Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld), s 55A);
- A work environment (s 55A);
- Plant (s55A); or
- Workplace interactions or behaviours (s 55A).

Common examples include job demands, low job control, poor support, inadequate recognition, unmanaged interpersonal conflict and exposure to traumatic events or material (Safe work Australia, 2024, p.13).

Psychological stress will not always be obvious and workers will commonly be exposed to a combination of stressors (Comcare, 2023, para 6). Safe Work Australia (2022) provides that psychosocial hazards may sound like the following:


I'm emotionally exhausted
I feel like a failure. How am I supposed to do all this?
I'm stressed/ burnt out
This place is toxic
I can't sleep thinking about it
I just don't know what I'm supposed to be doing

Exposure to psychosocial hazards can trigger a stress response, which manifests as physical, mental, or emotional reactions. This occurs when a worker perceives that the demands of their job exceed their capacity or available resources to effectively manage them.

Whilst stress does not constitute a psychological injury in isolation, the longer the work-related stress continues unresolved, the higher the risk that a psychological injury will occur (Healthy Workplaces, n.d.). Severe and unresolved episodes can result in anxiety, depression, self-harm or suicide.

Some examples of psychosocial hazards you may encounter in your library service are:

⇒ Demand for services exceeding staffing levels (Spencer, 2013, p. 13);
⇒ Isolated or remote working in regional areas due to budget limitations (Garner, 2024, p. 4);
⇒ Health implications caused by exposure to illnesses and disease through contact with the public and their belongings (LaPierre, 2021, para. 10);
⇒ Physical violence, verbal abuse, stalking and sexual harassment (Garner, 2024, p. 4);
⇒ Customer complaints towards collection items which reflect the key characteristics of minority groups;
⇒ Inadequate patron boundaries (Garner & Wahler, 2024);
⇒ Maintaining fluency with rapid technological changes (Spencer, 2013, p. 11);
⇒ Sustained and consistent emotional labour leading to vocational trauma (Ettarh, 2018);
⇒ Organisational restructures leading to the removal of library positions to other departments;
⇒ Social issues within the local community (Harwell, 2013, p. 6) ; or
⇒ The pressure of vocational awe leading to a gradual expansion of services beyond staff capabilities (Ettarh, 2018).

A comprehensive list of the health and safety considerations for libraries can be found by consulting industry bodies such as IFLA (2010, p. 90) and ALIA (2020, p. 77).

Psychosocial risks are the threats to a workers' psychological or physical wellbeing as a result of the hazard. Legislation defines them as *"a risk to the health and safety of a worker or other person from a psychosocial hazard"* (*Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld), s 55B). For example, patrons challenging collection items poses a psychosocial hazard, however staff feeling stressed as they identify with an attribute subject of the challenge is the psychosocial risk.

Managing psychosocial risks are imperative, as exposure to frequent, prolonged or consistent experiences which cause a stress response is likely to result in a psychological injury (*Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022* (Qld), p. 5). When library workers are faced with a consistent stress response, their resilience for everyday stressors will be reduced and the likelihood of a psychological injury developing is high.

KEY INDICATORS OF STRESS

The ability to recognise indicators of stress is a fundamental component to preventing the development of a psychological condition. In a study of public librarians, Kendrick Davis (2021) identified that library workers suffering from sustained causes of stress can manifest in the following ways:

- Emotional responses such as shock, fear, anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness, powerlessness, consistent anger and cycling through the five stages of grief (p. 11);
- Physiological responses such as general heightened states of stress, exhaustion, fatigue, hair loss, disturbed sleep, nausea, gastrointestinal problems, weight gain, and hypertension (p. 11);
- Cognitive responses such as work dread, reduced professional confidence, diminished concentration, self-censorship, depression, rumination, suicidal thoughts (p. 12); and

- Impacts upon professional practice, such as placing distance between the worker and patrons, reduced motivation to advance their career, and a general distaste for the profession (p. 12).

THE LEGISLATION

Employers in Australia have a legal obligation to take reasonable steps to care for their employees' physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Those obligations are created by a combination of the following sets of legislation:

⇒ *The Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld) (herein referred to as the "WH&S Act");
⇒ *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld) (herein referred to as the "WH&S Reg"); and
⇒ *Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022* (Qld) ("the Code").

The Code of Practice, WHS Act and WHS Regulation are separate pieces of legislation which work holistically to protect workers from instances of unsafe work practices.

STATUTORY OBLIGATIONS

Arising out of the legislation set out above, this section provides a systematic approach to meeting the duties imposed upon a 'person conducting a business', coupled with library specific scenarios to assist with placing the law in context.

Ensure the health and safety of workers
Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld), s 19.
01
Identify risks
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 34.
02
Manage psychosocial risks
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 55C.
03
Eliminate risks
(or minimise where elimination is not possible)
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 35.
04
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Review and revise control measures
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 38.
06
Provide information, training, instruction and supervision
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 39.
07
Consult with workers at every step
Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld), s 47.

Responsibilities of managers

You must: Ensure the health and safety of workers while engaged in work (so far as is reasonably practicable[1]). This includes providing a safe work environment, plant and structures, systems of work, adequate facilities, information, training and instruction and monitoring – s 19, *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld).

You must: Manage psychosocial risks, in line with the risk management requirements that follow – s 55C, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).

You must: Consult with workers on matters which directly affect their safety and provide an opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process (s 47, *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld). This step should ideally be repeated at every stage of the risk management process). See s49, *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld), for specific instances where workers must be consulted or the *Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice 2021* (Qld).

Library scenario – Due to an organisational restructure, the specialist library teams will now be absorbed by some of the wider Council teams, which requires them to start working from home. The library team leader recognised that this would create a substantial change to the team's working conditions and there was a potential for the workers to experience psychological distress. To address the changes, a focus group was held (using the Mentally Healthy Workplaces Focus group guide) to brainstorm how the team could maintain effective communications throughout the day. One of the team members mentioned they have experienced psychological distress when working from home previously, which is an admission that will assist the manager to know who might be at higher risk of developing stress. The manager encourages staff to continue raising issues as they arise.

You must: Identify reasonably foreseeable hazards that could give rise to health and safety risks – s 34, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).

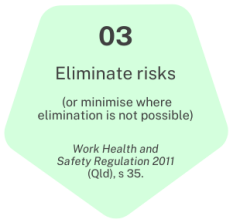
Library scenario – When designing a new program which runs after library business hours, the library team leader considered and recorded the aspects which might pose a risk to staff safety. A number of hazards were identified, such as the need for staff to work longer hours, to change their shift pattern to night shifts and the need for staff to rapidly acquire new information in order to run the program.

[1] *"Reasonably practicable"* means balancing what action can be taken with the likelihood of the hazard occurring, the degree of possible harm, what is known about the risk, the availability and suitability of ways to eliminate/minimise the risk, and the cost associated with the measures (including whether the cost if grossly disproportionate to the risk) – s 18 *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld).

You must: Assess the level of risk that identified hazards may present. Consider: duration – frequency – severity of exposure – and how hazards might interact and combine – *Managing the Risk of Psychosocial hazards at Work* 2022 (Qld), para 3.2.2.

Library scenario – Continuing the above scenario, the library team leader was unsure of the likelihood or severity of the consequences, or what injuries or illnesses might result. A risk assessment matrix (The Workplace Health & Safety Qld Psychosocial risk assessment tool) was completed in consultation with the Workplace Health & Safety representative for each hazard identified. It was recognised that while the risk of violence and aggression was low, workers were being exposed to frequent ongoing high demand and low support in their role at the same time, which would exacerbate the risk.

You must: Eliminate or minimise risks, using the hierarchy of control measures if elimination is not possible - s 35, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).



Library scenario – A library service eliminated the practice of charging customers late fees and lost/damaged item charges in order to remove the risk of physical and verbal abuse towards staff. Library management decided the risk to staff safety far outweighed the financial benefit of receiving fees and charges. This action was far more effective than introducing security guards or specific processes to try and minimise the impact of abuse towards staff.

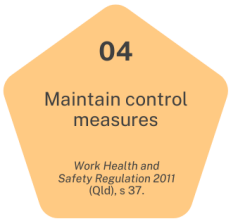
You must: Maintain any control measure (to eliminate or minimise risk) to ensure it is:

Fit for purpose;

Suitable for the nature and duration of work; and

Installed, set up and used correctly.

- S 37, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).



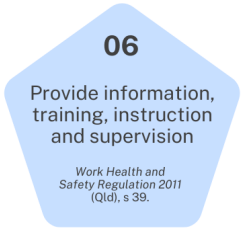
Library scenario – A library service purchased a full set of personal security pendants to help staff notify the central security team when they were experiencing an instance of customer violence or aggression. Unfortunately, there was no system of inspection in place to maintain the devices and when activated the devices rarely worked as intended. Implementing a system of regular testing and battery maintenance would support the devices to achieve their purpose.

You must: Review & revise control measures, particularly in circumstances where control measures have failed, new risks have arisen, or a new hazard is identified. – s 38, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).

Library scenario – Following on from the above example, the library manager consulted with staff on whether the personal security pendants were helping staff feel safer at work. Staff commented that they didn't bother wearing the pendants because when they pressed them, nothing happened. This prompted the manager to investigate why the devices were not working and what could be done to ensure the solution actually responded to the hazard. Upon learning that the pendants were not being regularly placed on charge, a new system was implemented to regularly

test the battery. On the second review, the manager established that the new system was working and that staff developed confidence in the devices, reducing their stress in relation to patron aggression and increasing their overall wellbeing.

You must: ensure workers are provided with information, training, instruction & supervision to protect them from risks to their psychological health and safety while at work. The information must be relevant to the nature of their work, the associated risks and the control measures implemented. – s39, *Work Health & Safety Regulation 2011* (Qld).



Library scenario – A new library employee was feeling increasingly stressed because the expectations and workload being delegated to them by a librarian was constantly changing. The library manager provided the worker with copies of their role description and the librarian's role description to demonstrate that the work being delegated should rest with the librarian. The library manager then provided instruction to the librarian about what tasks they could appropriately delegate.

Responsibilities of workers

Workers also have responsibilities under the legislation. The main obligation is discussed below.

You must: As a worker, ensure your own health and safety and do not adversely affect the health and safety of other workers – s 28, *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld).

Library scenario – A library worker found the safety policies of its organisation too long and boring, so refused to read them. When faced with an instance of occupational aggression, the worker did not know of the process to follow and therefore did not raise the incident with any of the necessary channels. That worker did not receive any of the post incident care that is intended to follow an incident of aggression and developed anxiety as a result. As the worker did not comply with their obligation to ensure their own health and safety, their compensation claim was denied.

Responsibilities of all other parties

Lastly, other persons at a workplace (including customers, contractors, visitors etc) have duties.

You must: As a customer, contractor, delivery person, patient or family member, take reasonable care for your safety, take care not to adversely affect other people's health and safety and comply with reasonable instructions given to you by the organisation. S 29, *Work Health & Safety Act 2011* (Qld).

Library scenario – A library service made the decision to impose a behavioural code of conduct for customers to support its staff. Customers were presented with the behavioural codes and procedures on entrance to the building and were required to confirm their agreement to them upon taking a membership. The standards prohibited aggression, bullying and sexual harassment and various provisions around computer usage. Customer were bound to follow them and they were warned that failure to do so could expose them to liability for a monetary penalty. The existence of this policy increased staff perception of safety. If the policy did not exist, the Council might be liable for failing to minimise risks when faced with a claim for psychological injury.

COMMON LAW

Employers also have a duty under common law[2] to take all reasonable steps to provide employees with a safe system of work. Without legal advice, it can be difficult to determine what actions constitute 'all reasonable steps' in each scenario.

To determine whether a workplace has taken reasonable steps to manage the risk, the court will weigh the magnitude of possible harm, the degree of possibility of its occurrence, and the burden of taking precautions.

An example of this might be the threat of physical violence posed by patrons at the service desk. In that circumstance, the potential for physical and psychological harm is high. If the corresponding degree of possibility was significant due to the demographic, then a court would expect an organisation to tolerate a very high degree of burden in implementing any safeguards. For example, a library service with a history of violent attacks in a demographic with a high crime rate will be expected to have a correspondingly high expenditure on security measures.

In contrast, staff might find consider changes in technology a stressor. In this circumstance, the potential for harm is much lower (although just as likely), and therefore a court would not expect a significantly costly, time consuming or inconvenient measure to be put in place in response.

CONSEQUENCES OF NONCOMPLIANCE

Most organisations comprehend that positive workplace wellbeing results in decreased absenteeism, decrease in turnover and recruitment costs, high output and quality of work, and increase in top talent (Worksafe Qld, 2020). Putting aside the clear benefits, failures to adopt safe work practices can expose an organisation to a range of consequences, including:

- Complaints by workers to Workplace Health and Safety Qld;
- Inspections, improvement notices, remedial actions, prohibition notices and/or seizure of property by Workplace Health and Safety Qld;
- Prosecution by Workplace Health and Safety Qld;
- The imposition of monetary penalties by Workplace Health and Safety Qld;
- Entry to the workplace by a union;
- Claims for discrimination by workers on protected grounds;
- Claims for personal injury by workers under statutory schemes (workers' compensation) or common law;
- Claims by workers for unfair dismissal;
- General protection claims;
- Industrial disputes;
- Criminal liability for negligent or reckless conduct; or
- Criminal liability for industrial manslaughter.

[2] Common law claims are used to seek compensation between two parties, as opposed to criminal penalties and charges enforced by the State Authority.

LIBRARY SPECIFIC PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

HIGH/LOW JOB DEMANDS

What is it?

While some psychosocial hazards are specific to the library industry, the risk posed by drastically high and low job demands is experienced universally across industries.

Ultimately, every variety of organisation is in the pursuit of an endeavour. Whether that is pressure to make profits and satisfy shareholders, or to achieve efficiency for ratepayers or taxpayers, organisations must delicately balance the pursuit of its aims with appropriate staffing levels, expectations of output, distribution of workload and relevant skills and qualifications.

The threat to psychological safety in this area comes from *"sustained or intense high levels of physical, mental or emotional job demands which are excessive, unreasonable or chronically exceed workers' capacity",* or *"sustained very low levels of mental demands from the job, ie monotonous work"* (Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice, 2022, p. 15). Threats can also involve long hours, fast work pace, long periods of vigilance and emotional effort, (Safe Work Australia, 2019, p. 10).

Alternatively, work which contains little or no job demands, highly repetitive tasks, lack of professional growth, lack of engagement, role redundancy or underutilisation of skills can also impact wellbeing, morale and retention (American Psychological Association, 2024, p. 2).

As libraries are commonly vehicles of local and state government, many issues with respect to excessive work demands stem from budgetary restrictions. This does not only impact staffing numbers and uneven workload, but can lead to limited training opportunities, restriction of programs, digital resources, and community outreach efforts (International Federation of Library Associations, 2021, para. 6).

The law

Statutory obligations

In order to meet the statutory obligations imposed on organisations in relation to excessively high and low job demands, it is necessary to identify risks, manage risks, eliminate (or minimise) risks, maintain control measures, review and revise control measures, provide information, training, instruction and supervision on risks, and consult workers at every step of this process. Whilst the process is extensive and all factors must be accounted for, the steps are clear and transparent.

Highlighting issues with budget will not excuse an organisation from having to meet their statutory obligations. Examples of risk mitigation strategies in the case of substandard library budgets could be optimizing worklows (ie streamlining processes), leveraging volunteers or trainees, using technology such as self-checkouts and automated reminders, or cross training staff in diverse skills.

Common law

By way of reminder, employers have a duty under common law to take all reasonable steps to provide employees with a safe system of work. Whilst the rule sounds simple, determining what is meant by *"all reasonable steps"* (which is an objective test) in each circumstance is an exercise more complicated than

it infers. In fact, there is a whole area of legal practice devoted to this topic and it is common for lawyers to confine their scope of practice to this area.

Safe Work Australia developed an extremely useful guide called *'How to determine what is reasonably practicable to meet a health and safety duty'* (2013). Despite its age and the change to section numbers, the guide continues to offer non-legal practitioners an opportunity to develop a working understanding of the legal meaning of '*reasonably practicable'* as it applies to a person conducting a business undertaking. The guiding principles are contained in page 4, such as the likelihood of the hazard occurring and the degree of harm that might result from the risk. Page 5 contains an extensive breakdown of each principle. It is important to determine *what can be done* in response to the risk and *what is reasonable* to do and to work back from the highest level of protection. Those 2 factors then must be balanced to arrive at a conclusion. It is vital to include your legal team in any discussions before making a determination.

A recent decision by the Supreme Court of Queensland (*Ackers v Cairns Regional Council* [2021] QSC 342) reinforces the importance of employers promptly identifying and addressing staffing and resource shortages in order to discharge their duty of care to their employees in relation to high or low workload issues.

The claimant, Mr Ackers, was a payroll supervisor in a local government organisation. As a result of poor workplace culture a number of employees resigned, leaving a highly understaffed workforce and placing significant stress on the remaining employees. Mr Ackers began working significant overtime, including weekends, RDOs and on 2 occasions, overnight, to compensate for the high workload.

Based on the evidence provided to the court, the judges concluded that the employer was aware of the claimant's situation and that there were signs that should have put them on notice that he was psychologically distressed. They held that the employer failed to manage his workload, unfairly attributed mistakes to him, inadequately responded to his distress and should have foreseen that a psychological injury would arise.

Mr Ackers was awarded $1.1 million dollars in damages, on the basis that the employer failed to take reasonable steps to prevent his injury.

What did this case teach us?

This list below contains the reasonable steps the judges thought should have been taken by the workplace to prevent the injury from occurring:

- Address staffing issues proactively – Mr Ackers had asked for more skilled staff on a number of occasions when his team was short-handed. The Council failed to do so and therefore did not distribute the workload fairly.
- Respond to employee complaints effectively – The employer knew about Mr Ackers' distress but did not do enough to help him. Addressing employee concerns quickly and having meaningful conversations could have reduced the risk of psychological harm.
- Implement proper workplace support systems – The Council should have noticed the early signs of workplace stress, especially after Mr Ackers' colleagues saw changes in his behaviour. Offering employee assistance programs, mental health support, and keeping an eye on employee well-being could have helped prevent the situation.
- Fair and transparent performance management – Mr Ackers was put on a performance management plan that was found to be flawed and unfair, given the circumstances he had been placed in.

This case shows it is vital to take active measures to mitigate workplace risks regarding high or low workloads to ensure a safe and healthy work environment.

Suggestions for management

The *Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022* (Qld) contains helpful guidance at page 55 as to practice measures that can adopted in response to the general and non-industry specific risks posed by excessively high and low job demands. Some of those general suggestions are:

- Rotate tasks and activities to ensure staff are not overexposed to time pressured or monotonous work;
- Negotiate reasonable deadlines for completing tasks;
- Ensure work is matched with the employees skill level;
- Provide cover for workers on leave;
- Manage and limit overtime; or
- Engage in career planning conversations to ensure work provides a sense of purpose.

Provide resources for staff

Libraries often receive the majority of their funding for collection usage. Quarantining part of the collection budget for physical and digital mental health resources for staff is likely to be advantageous toward encouraging staff to manage their low or high workloads, particularly if time is given to review those resources. For budgeting purposes, an increase in mental health will have a positive financial benefit if the resources encourage greater work attendance rate and efficiency.

Another useful resource for encouraging staff to manage their workload is having a thorough understanding of the resources available within your organisation's Employee Assistance Program ("EAP") package. Linde Furman (through the Surviving the Stacks Podcast, 2024) discusses how important it is to scrutinise the agreement with your EAP provider to ensure you are gaining the full benefit. When Linde reviewed the agreement for her service, she ascertained that they were not utilising the ability to have on-demand counselling services attend their workplace following an incident, or their choice of provider.

These suggestions are not exhaustive and are intended to demonstrate that a library service does not necessarily need greater funding to provide better mental health support.

Offer skill development

In response to the risk of low job engagement, library workers can be offered upskilling opportunities to assist in programming, collection development, outreach or tech services.

The opportunities offered should involve meaningful projects which encourage learning, teamwork, community minded activities and should encourage a greater sense of purpose.

Engage a Human Factors Specialist

A human factors specialist can play a key role in ensuring that library workplace design applies principles of ergonomics, organisational psychology and user-centred design.

By focussing on workplace design, a Human Factors Specialists can optimise the physical workspaces used by libraries to reduce stress and improve comfort. For instance, they might recommend ergonomic furniture or reconfigure the layout to reduce repetitive movements or strain, especially for staff who work at service desks or perform tasks like shelving or cataloguing.

They will also review task workflows and help redesign tasks to ensure they align with staff capabilities, reducing unnecessary physical or cognitive strain. This could involve simplifying complex processes, improving the automation of physically or cognitively repetitive tasks, or better distributing workload to prevent burnout

Lastly, they can advise on how staff interact with patrons and with each other. They can propose communication strategies or policies that foster a positive, low-stress work environment. This could include designing better systems for managing patron expectations and addressing challenging situations.

In practice

In order to support its leaders to identify, manage and support early signs of psychological stress, Gold Coast Libraries has implemented Mental Health First Aid training for its branch supervisors.

These courses are inexpensive and equip leaders with the knowledge to identify warning signs of mental distress early and intervene with the appropriate actions.

The cost of this training was identified as justified in line with the following advantages:

- The ability to identify early warning signs, which will assist leaders to adhere to their statutory obligations;
- Provide immediate support to library workers experiencing psychosocial hazards such as occupational violence or vicarious trauma;
- Reducing the stigma surrounding mental health by fostering a culture of openness and support, demonstrating a commitment to staff wellbeing; and
- Enhancing staff confidence by providing leaders with the tools to handle stressful or potentially volatile situations.

Another initiative used by City of Gold Coast managers to control risk created by job demands is the Fatigue Reference Tool. This checklist is intended to be completed by the line leader in collaboration with the worker and covers topics such as: sleep, medication, whether self reporting or the result of a natural disaster and whether the worker is under other sources of stress. Based on the responses given, a low, medium or high-risk score is given and corresponding advice.

Advice for staff suffering from medium level fatigue include encouraging alertness strategies, discussing the fatigue and following first aid and injury management procedures. High risk workers are recommended to immediately stop work or be placed on alternative duties.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

What is it?

Vicarious trauma, also referred to as compassion fatigue or emotional labour, is a psychosocial hazard that is common to "helping professions" (Kendrick, 2021, p.3). It is a significant issue among library workers, especially those who frequently interact with patrons experiencing crises, such as homelessness, mental health issues, or abuse.

This exposure can lead to emotional exhaustion, stress, and even secondary trauma, similar to what social workers and first responders experience (Katopol, 2015, p. 2). This can even extend to a physiological response (Lipsky & Burk, 2009, p. 42).

It is believed that library workers are susceptible to compassion fatigue as they *"bring commitments to service and accessibility not present in many other professions"* and *"the Librarians admirable ethic of working on a problem until a solution is found can keep the patron's problems at the forefront of their mind"* (Katopol, 2015 p. 2). Commonly, helping professions believe they are immune from the suffering they witness, however this is rarely the case (Lipsky & Burk, 2009, p. 42).

Compounding this issue is the fact that library workers are often unsupported by their management (or management's perceptions of staff trauma is unrealistic) and are rarely acknowledged for their role in managing frontline social issues (Trauma in the Library, n.d., para 3).

Sadly, the most common health condition experienced by library workers is anxiety (42.2%) and depression (34.7%), and staff with pre-existing trauma are 50% more susceptible to vicarious trauma (Trauma in the Library, n.d. para 10 & 16).

The most obvious sign of 'Trauma Exposure Response' is a negative shift in worldview, where external trauma impacts a person's internal reality (Lipsky & Burk, 2009, p. 42). A common example would be where the perception of patrons changes from being inherently good to inherently violent, abusive or unpredictable.

Sources suggest that vicarious trauma can also manifest in personality changes, emotional dysregulation, catastrophising, withdrawal or detachment from work and family, guilt or shame, difficulty concentrating, changes in appetite, increased used of drugs and alcohol, frequent absenteeism or lateness and diminished creativity (Katopol, 2015, p. 2). Common trauma responses are included in the table below.

(Library Worker Support Network, 2024, p. 22).

The law

Workplace law in Queensland provides protections to workers in multiple ways in relation to vicarious trauma. *The Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) contains the following relevant provisions:

- Employees have the right to raise concerns about all workplace health and safety (including the risk of vicarious trauma). Employers must not take adverse action against employees who exercise this right, as per s 340;
- Employees are protected from discrimination on the basis of mental health conditions, including trauma related conditions. Employers must make reasonable adjustments for employees experiencing these conditions, as per s 351;
- The failure to resolve a complaint could constitute workplace bullying and be dealt with under s 789FD; and
- Employees have the right to request flexible work arrangements due to vicarious trauma or psychological distress, under s 65.

Turning now to the duty to prevent psychological injuries, employers have both a statutory obligations and a common law duty to take all reasonable steps to provide employees with a safe and protected system of work. This includes ensuring that psychosocial hazards are identified, understood, and managed.

For a reminder of the statutory obligations, please refer to the graph on page 4 to identify the key responsibilities of an organisation under the workplace health and safety laws in Queensland.

With respect to the common law duty of care (which is also a duty to prevent psychological injuries), we can gain an understanding by reviewing the below case to ascertain what steps the Court felt needed to be taken to make the system of work adequately safe.

In *Kozarov v Victoria* [2022] HCA 12, a solicitor was found to have developed a psychiatric injury as a result of being consistently exposed to troubling material in the course of her employment with the Specialist Sexual Offences Unit of the Victorian Office of Public Prosecutions.

She sued her employer for compensation, alleging their failure to take reasonable care for her psychological wellbeing led to the development of her psychiatric injury.

The High Court decided that the employer did breach its duty of care to the employee and criticised them for not taking reasonably available preventative or protective measures.

What did this case teach us?

This case highlighted that the below steps should have been taken by the workplace to prevent the injury from occurring:

- More intensive training for management and staff on the risks of vicarious trauma;
- Perform welfare checks;
- Have an active OH&S framework in place;
- Training for managers to identify red flags and when to refer employees for work related screenings;
- Intervene in a timely manner when signs of poor mental health arise and offer workplace screenings;
- Have a system in place to respond to workplace screening;
- A flexible approach to work allocation; and
- Modified work location/areas[3].

Suggestions for management

Identify changes in behaviour

Library leaders need to be on the lookout for changes in behaviour which may indicate early signs of vicarious trauma (Katopol, 2015, p. 3). This requires a manager to understand workers' foundational worldviews, in order to identify if they have shifted.

Create a Trigger Action Plan

Whilst library managers may not have dedicated qualifications in counselling or psychology, it is not necessary to leave all aspects of the management of trauma to an Employee Assistance Program. Any person can hold a conversation with a worker about how a situation might impact their worldview, known as 'trauma stewardship' (Lipsky & Burk, 2009, p. 117).

Managers need to provide a safe space for workers to discuss their emotions, provide positive suggestions for dealing with stress, introduce the topic of emotional labour as early as orientation, and teach them the boundary between caring and *"draw*[ing] *the line for their own mental health and to maintain effectiveness in their job"* (Katopol, 2015, p,.2).

It is also within the realm of the manager to create practical procedures and policies that show workers that their wellbeing is being prioritised. Examples of this would include a 'Trigger Action Plan', which provides a framework for workers to debrief on difficult experiences in the moment (whether that is through EAP or otherwise) and that arrangements are made to cover that worker's tasks (Capital District Library Council, 2024, para. 10).

[3] *Kozarov v Victoria* [2002] HCA 12, 82.

Guidance from The Code of Practice

The '*Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice'* provides specific guidance for exposure to traumatic events. Some examples, which have been reimagined in a library scenario are:

- Rotate customer facing roles throughout the day to ensure that exposure to the public is balanced amongst team members (p 59);
- If exposure to emotional labour is unavoidable, additional risk controls need to be implemented such as reduced workload, implementing adequate breaks and recovery, or mental health check ins by a leader (p. 60);
- Managers must be trained to adequately support repeated exposure and workers must be trained to report their exposure (p. 60).

In practice

A valuable strategy for dealing with vicarious trauma is applying a 'trauma informed libraries' approach.

In essence, a 'trauma-informed libraries' approach is a framework that acknowledges that both library patrons and staff will approach situations with pre-existing trauma (Ford, 2019, para. 7) and considers their lived experiences and trauma when looking at the individual, their situation, reactions, and mental health (Library Workers Support Network, 2024, p. 19). The framework integrates principles that foster safety (Tolley, 2020, p. 47), transparency and trustworthiness (p. 61), peer support (p. 73), collaboration and mutuality (p. 83), empowerment (p. 89) and cultural sensitivity and inclusion (p. 97). This approach aims to make libraries more welcoming and accessible while also safeguarding the well-being of workers who may experience vicarious trauma.

In Australia, trauma-informed librarianship is gaining traction. Charles Sturt University's Social Work in Libraries Online Simulation Hub has highlighted the importance of trauma-informed practices in libraries, including training staff in trauma awareness and creating service models that support both patrons and employees (Wahler, 2023).

VOCATIONAL AWE AND MISSION CREEP

What is it?

The term 'vocational awe' is well summarised as the *"set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that results in notions that libraries are inherently good, sacred notions and therefore beyond critique"* (Ettarh, 2018, para. 1). With that theory comes the idea that Library workers have a sacred duty to serve the community with unwavering understanding and neutrality and to be the "*cornerstone of democracy*" (Hayden, 2003).

While this phenomenon can be inspirational for library workers, it can also create overwhelming and unrealistic expectations about what libraries should strive to achieve (Kendrick Davis, 2021, p. 4). This further creates pressure on library workers in the form of "resilience narratives" to act outside the scope of their role and prioritise the needs of their community, sometimes over their personal boundaries, skills and comfort levels (p. 4).

Peak industry bodies, such as the International Federation of Library Association ("IFLA"), accept that as the demands on library workers become more diverse, the requisite skills often extend beyond what is listed in the job description (IFLA, 2010, p. 83). The issue that arises is understanding what an acceptable departure from the role is. Library services are entitled to decide their own boundaries - consistency with those boundaries is key.

The natural fluidity of library services lends itself to slow and subtle expansion of services outside the boundaries of a library's traditional offering in order to fulfil this self-imposed prophecy (Ettarh, 2018). This is referred to as "mission creep" or "services creep" (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004). Examples of this include:

- ⇒ Administering drug overdose medication to patrons (and undertaking the training in order to do so safely) (Newall, 2020);
- ⇒ Providing daycare (Schmidt, 2020); and
- ⇒ Transforming premises into an emergency refuge shelter (State Library of Qld, 2022); and
- ⇒ Assisting homeless patrons to obtain housing, akin to that of a social worker (Sanders, 2024).

It is expected that patrons will turn to libraries to fulfil their information needs, however social issues become more complex in the community, the level of specified knowledge required to address these issues also increases. This poses a problem when library workers have not received the proper training, education, tools and support to do so safely. This is compounded in circumstances where staff have not been given clear boundaries in their interactions with patrons.

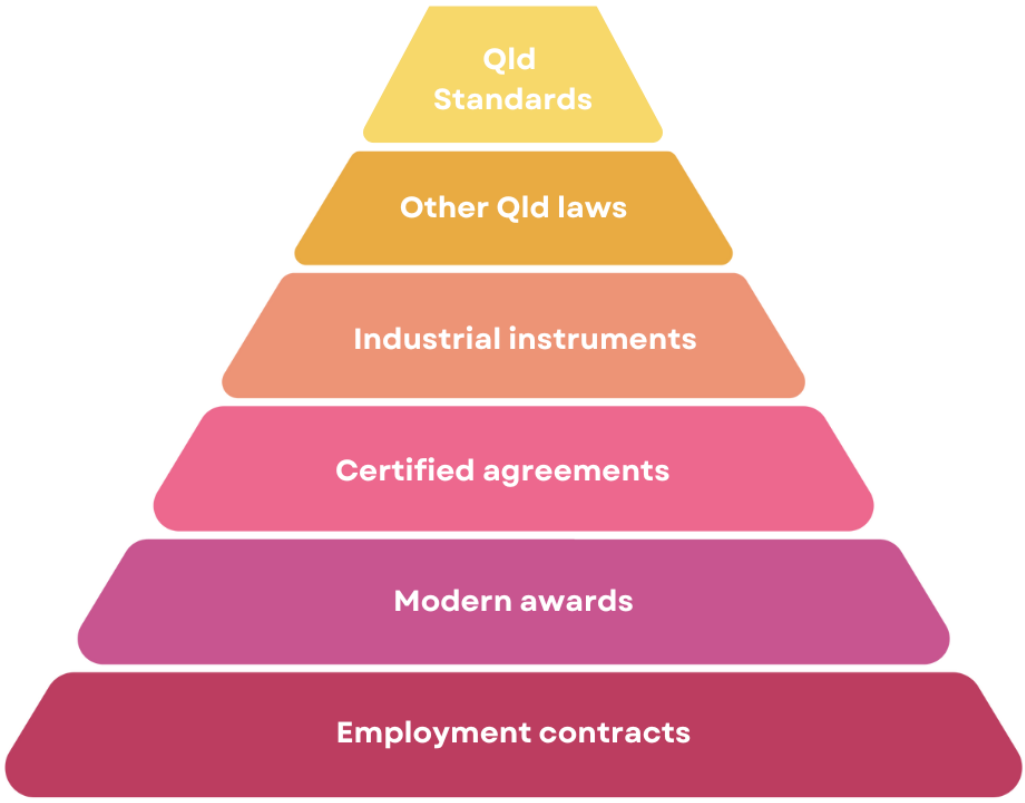
Vocational awe and mission creep have the potential to place excessive work demands upon employees. The potential psychosocial hazards are unclear work expectations, conflicting priorities, persistent training of new technologies and a breach of personal boundaries.

The World Health Organisation links excessive work demands to burnout and mental health disorders (World Health Organisation, n.d.). Similarly, a study in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology found that blurred work boundaries increase stress and sleep disturbances.

The Law

With respect to managing services creep, libraries must not only consider their duties in relation to the development of psychological injuries, but also closely monitor whether the working conditions breach industrial laws.

A worker's employment rights and conditions are safeguarded by a series of legal entitlements, such as industrial legislation, employment contracts, certified agreements, modern awards and industry standards. Where there is inconsistency between these layers, a hierarchy of authority exists as contained in ss 16 – 20 of the *Industrial Relations Act 2016* (Qld), as reflected in the below diagram.



(*Industrial Relations Act 2016* (Qld), ss 17 - 20)

The levels of authority should be consulted in the order reflected above to define job roles, in addition to industry guidelines such as IFLA and ALIA's workforce guidelines. For example, IFLA instruct that "*Staff should have a written agreement at the time of their appointment, which clearly states their duties and responsibilities. These should not be changed without consulting the member of staff involved*" (2010, p. 88).

An example of this is reflected in the City of Gold Coast Certified Agreement 2024, wherein it is stated that *"The City will ensure that each position shall have a written job description available, outlining the competencies that the occupant of the position is required to possess"* (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2024, p. 32).

If a worker seeks to raise an industrial dispute that the work they are completing falls outside of the ambit of their role, they can:

- make a complaint to the Fair Work Commission,
- sue their employer in common law for breach of contract,
- seek compensation under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) for underpayment in line with higher duties, or
- seek reclassification to a higher level under the Certified Agreement or Modern Award.

Suggestions for management

Maintain awareness

Understanding the impact of vocational awe is a key step to identifying unhealthy behaviours. Awareness of the potential for services creep before it occurs can assist to promote a healthier work environment and ensure that library workers can sustain their roles and professional identity without compromising their personal well-being.

It is incumbent upon managers to ensure staff are aware that their positive mental wellbeing is the highest priority.

Have a mission statement

Hargreaves (2021, para 1) explains that mission creep occurs when libraries *"fail to meaningfully describe and promote our fundamental mission and the specific library services that support that mission"*.

A large scale study of Australian library mission, vision and purpose statements was completed in 2022 (Hider, Garner, Wakeling & Jamali) which identified that a large proportion of the statements mentioned facilitating learning and discovery, increase social connectedness, support literacy, provide programs and spaces to support imagination and creativity (p. 10).

Set boundaries

Implementing clear service policies provides boundaries for what library workers are and are not expected do in relation to service or information requests. Staff can find comfort in this clarity and can rely on any written policies in their discussions with customers.

These policies can take the form of written job roles or customer codes of conduct. As mentioned previously, industry guidelines can greatly assist with this process. IFLA provides comprehensive overviews of what each job role should entail (2010, p. 85).

An example would be to specify the tasks involved in your service (for eg, reference, printing, readers advisory, genealogy, tech help, etc) but further refine those boundaries such as *"while we can't fill out your job application for you, we can help you find the most relevant and best resources for your job search"* (Hargreaves, 2021, para. 14). It is then important to ensure that staff read, understand and follow these policies.

Establish relationships

Instead of taking on all responsibilities internally, libraries benefit from establishing partnerships with institutional departments, such as disability and housing services.

In practice

The Indianapolis Public Library identified that whilst it's the responsibility of libraries to meet the evolving needs of the community, the needs of their patrons were expanding beyond their service capability (Benson, 2022, para. 3). To address this, they hired a social worker to deal with complex life issues that fell outside the ambit of a library workers' skillset.

To practically achieve this, the library repurposed a Librarian position to fund the newly created position (Benson, 2022, para. 22).

VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

What is it?

Safe Work Australia provides that "*Workplace violence and aggression is when a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at the workplace or while they're working. It can cause both physical and psychological harm, making it a risk to health and safety*" (n.d., para1). In the digital age, employees also face the risk of experiencing abuse online or with other technologies (Safe Work Australia, 2021a, para. 3). This is more commonly experienced in library customer care roles or online reference roles.

Sexual harassment is defined by the Code of Practice as *"any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that is done either to offend, humiliate or intimidate another person, or where it is reasonable to expect the person might feel that way. It includes uninvited physical intimacy such as touching in a sexual way, uninvited sexual propositions, and remarks with sexual connotations*" (p. 17).

A lesser known category of workplace violence is 'gendered violence'. This kind of violence can *"appear in many forms, for example rigid workplace norms based on gender stereotypes, different uniform requirements for men and women, or negative comments about a worker's sexual orientation or the way they look"* (Safe Work Australia, 2021c, p. 5).

The reality of intentional and unintentional violence within libraries certainly conflicts with the preconceived notion held by non-library workers that libraries are *"an idyllic workplace that is quiet and free from distractions that hinder the relaxing days of reading to one's content"* (Kendrick Davis, 2021, p. 3). The reality of library work is reflected in a New York Times article, which noted *"As libraries become public stages for social problems — homelessness, drug use, mental health — the people who work there are burning out*" (Caron, 2024, para. 1).

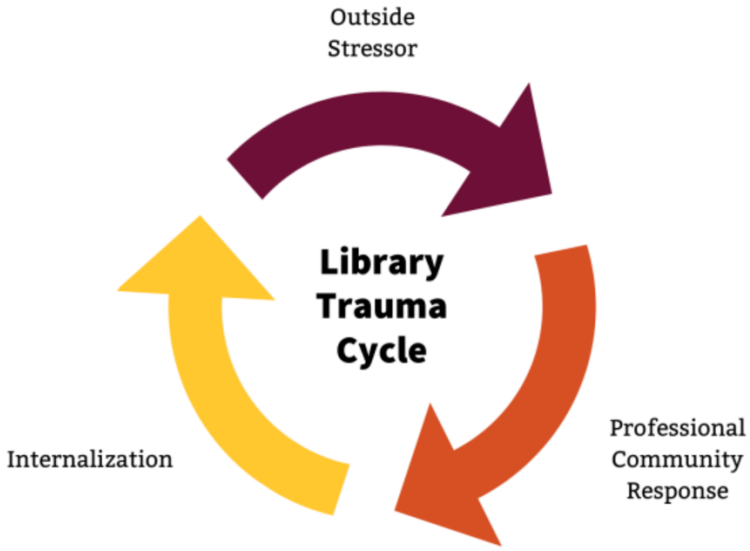
In her study of low morale amongst public librarians, Kendrick Davis (2021, p. 3) reports that 93% of the study participants reported to have experienced verbal abuse from library users (p. 7). The types of abuse experienced were emotional abuse, verbal or written abuse, system abuse, negligence and physical abuse (p. 10).

A recent national inquiry into sexual harassment in Australian workplaces demonstrated that violence, abuse and sexual harassment also commonly occur from within the workplace, at a rate of 26% by men and 39% by women (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, p. 10). The cost to workplaces is estimated to be $3.8 billion annually. The "Respect@Work" report also concluded that the current system for addressing sexual harassment was complex and confusing for victims and employers to understand (Queensland Government, 2024, p. 2).

As a result of the prevalence of violence, abuse and harassment towards library staff, a widescale study was undertaken in 2022 by an organisation known as Urban Librarians Unite in partnership with the New York Library Association and St. John's University, with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The group developed the *2022 Urban Library Trauma Study* and obtained responses from 568 staff members across the United States. In that research, it was reported that nearly 70 percent of respondents said that they had experienced violent or aggressive behaviour from customers (Urban Librarians Unite, 2022).

The results of the study were significant and lead to the creation of the Library Workers Support Group, discussed later in this section.

The Urban Librarians Unite group established the 'Library Trauma Cycle', which endeavours to assist sufferers of trauma to intercept and disrupt behaviours which can lead to the development of psychological injury if persistently reinforced (Library Worker Support Network, 2024, p. 18). The most critical step in the lifecycle is 'professional community response'. Where there is a lack of response or adequate support by managers, coworkers or the community, this leads to the internalisation of the trauma (p. 18). It is noted however that *"the cycle can be broken at any point if there are interventions to support the individual from internalizing the incident"* (p. 18).



The law

Industrial laws

As violence, abuse and sexual harassment are serious and prevalent issues in Australian workplaces, there is an overwhelming amount of laws which afford protections to workers in this area. Libraries experiencing these issues should seek legal advice immediately to ensure they are taking all reasonable steps to protect workers from possible harm in this area.

As a result of the recommendations of the '*Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces Report',* Queensland introduced the *Respect at Work and Other Matters Amendment Act* 2024 (Qld) ("The Bill") which concluded that the existing frameworks to deal with these issues were not adequate (Queensland Government, 2024, p. 2). The objectives of the Act were to promote respectful workplaces, prevent harassment and discrimination, support victims and ensure compliance by establishing clear guidelines and consequences for non-compliance.

The most significant amendment introduced by this legislation is a positive duty on employers to *"take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation, as far as possible (recommendation 17 of the Respect@Work Report)"* (Australian Government, 2024, p. 2). This is reflected in s 47(2)(b) of the *Sex Discrimination Act* 1984 (Cth) and s 131I of the *Anti Discrimination Act 1991* (Qld). The key goal of this amendment was *"shifting the burden from individuals making complaints to employers taking proactive and preventative actions"* (p. 11). This is a

historic shift for Queensland legislation, reflecting the highest level of protection afforded to Queensland workers in this regard.

The Act also provides guidance as to how ensure threats of violence and sexual harassment must be managed. Examples of that guidance is:

- ensuring there are organisational policies in place that address the importance of respectful behaviour in the workplace;
- ensuring easily accessible information is available;
- conducting workplace surveys to measure knowledge and awareness of unlawful conduct like discrimination or sexual harassment and the extent to which such conduct may have been experienced by members of the workforce;
- engaging in informal or formal disciplinary discussions with members of the organisation who are displaying conduct that may be disrespectful and unlawful under the AD Act; and
- managers and people in positions of leadership clearly and regularly articulating expectations of respectful behaviour.

It is important to remember that these obligations exist in relation to both physical workplaces and digital parts of a workplace, such as answering inbound customer calls or dealing with the public on social media.

Another significant amendment is the introduction of powers for the Australian Human Rights Council to assess and enforce compliance with the positive duty (p. 2).

Criminal laws

All people, whether internal or external to the workplace, are subject to the criminal offences in the *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld). The offence of assault is created by s 245 and sexual assault and rape is covered by s 352. With respect to penalties for those offences, the Act mentioned previously also introduced changes to the *Penalties and Sentences Act 1992* (Qld), which in effect allows judges to impose aggravated sentences on perpetrators of violence and sexual harassment when the offending occurs within a workplace (p. 5). This creates yet another historic gain in Queensland for the protection of workers in relation to threats of sexual violence from colleagues and the public.

Workplace Safety laws

In line with the *Workplace Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld), s 55(C)(2), persons conducting a business or undertaking must manage the health and safety risks of workplace violence and aggression between workers and from other people at the workplace, like customers and clients (Safe Work Australia, n.d.). As noted on page 9 of this resource, elimination is the highest step in the hierarchy of controls. If it is possible and reasonable to eliminate a hazard, then that is the standard that will be expected by a court.

PCBUs must also proactively manage the risks of sexual harassment of gender-based discrimination through s 55C. Workplaces looking to ensure they are taking adequate measures should consult sections 55E – 55H, which includes considerations such as:

- characteristics of the workers (such as age, disability, sexual orientation etc); or
- characteristics of the workplace, such as power imbalances or whether alcohol is consumed.

As of March 2025, it is specifically required by the legislation that a **written prevention plan** be enacted and that the control measures put in place to prevent sexual harassment are reviewed (ss 55G & 55HJ). The requirements of the prevention plan are extensive. Please refer to the Queensland Government's factsheet for more information on the changes to the legislation.

The Code of Practice also notes a requirement at p. 24 that where aggression or violence is inherent in the work, a separate risk assessment specific to the work-related violence should be conducted.

Lastly, an important guiding document to be aware of is the *Sexual and gender based Code of Practice 2023*. This document is designed to be read and applied in conjunction with the existing psychosocial hazards Code of Practice. It provides guidance to organisations on how to practically identify and manage the risks posed by this psychosocial hazard, including how to manage complaints.

Suggestions for management

General

In line with the Act, employers are encouraged to manage the risks to workers by identifying risks, implementing control measures in accordance with the hierarchy of controls, reviewing control measures and implementing a prevention plan (Queensland Government, 2024, para. 5).

IFLA provides that library staff should be trained, internal communications systems should enable staff to warn others, records of antisocial behaviour should be kept, and systems should be developed to help staff deal with these behaviours (2010, p. 91).

Some other practical suggestions to remove the threat of abuse towards staff are:

- removing cash and valuables from premises;
- ensure staff never work in isolation when dealing with the public (particularly at night);
- reduce the need for staff to serve highly vulnerable members of the community, such as cognitively impaired customers or customer affected by drugs or alcohol;
- create close connections with community services (such as Head2Health) which staff can connect customers with in order to assist them with any domestic issues;
- avoid working in high crime areas;
- seek to reduce or limit the amount of distressing content experienced by workers;
- provide training to staff in violence prevention measures, situational awareness, positive behaviour strategies and de-escalation training;
- ensure recruitment and selection practices incorporate a realistic perception of likely exposure to violence and abuse; and
- Use the Office of Industrial Relations *'Violence and aggression incident investigation tool'* post incident report form to highlight future controls and learnings to prevent further incidents.

Suggestions made by the 2022 Urban Library Trauma Study were:

- Library Worker Support Line: A national helpline for immediate mental health support.
- Standards for Healthy Library Workplaces: Developed by a coalition of worker-led organizations.
- Policies and Procedures for Trauma-Informed Leadership: Templates for libraries to adopt.

Lastly, the *Sexual and gender based Code of Practice 2023* recommends that a Trauma Informed Approach should be adopted (p. 35), which is discussed above at page 19 of this resource. This is process whereby the organisation recognises and acknowledges that past experiences of trauma can impact how a worker responds to systems and processes (p. 35).

eSafety resources

The Australian Government has a specific department dedicated to supporting Australians to partake in safe online behaviour. This includes supporting workers who work in the online and digital space.

To enhance the psychological wellbeing of staff who may experience difficult customer behaviour online, the eSafety website offers a host of tools ranging from Managing the impacts, to Tips for protecting your wellbeing (eSafety Commissioner, 2024a, para. 1). Social media self-defence courses are also offered for those at risk of being the target of online abuse on social media, due to their higher public profile (eSafety Commissioner, 2024a, para. 1).

Direct guidance given by this organisation is to:

- Create a safe and secure online environment;
- change systems, policies and procedures to minimise risks;
- Moderate content on your online platforms;
- Report abusive content;
- Implement workplace policies;
- Provide information and training;
- Create a positive and respectful workplace culture;
- Encourage workers to report online abuse;
- Address online abuse within the workplace; and
- Talk to your workers.
  (Safe Work Australia, 2021b).

Environmental design

Libraries can also employ the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) to create a safer library environment. This can include improving lighting, ensuring clear sightlines, and designing spaces to reduce isolated areas. Whilst libraries often utilise security guards or devices to create safety against violence, the best method for management is elimination, which is achieved most easily through design.

Patron Behaviour Agreements

Implementing patron behaviour agreements or codes of conduct (especially those who have previously exhibited disruptive behaviour) are paramount to provide staff with a sense of safety, but also to ensure statutory obligations can be met. These agreements outline acceptable conduct and consequences for violations.

As discussed previously on page 10, customers, contractors and visitors have duties under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Qld) (s 29), to comply with reasonable instructions given to them by the organisation. If a workplace does not possess codes of conduct or behaviour agreements to provide to point to, there is no basis to accept a certain standard of conduct except for criminal laws.

Some beneficial policies for libraries to have in place are: acceptable customer conduct policies (including appropriate attire directions), acceptable IT usage policies, acceptable usage of furniture policies, supervision of children policies, unaccompanied minors policies, service and support animals policies, sleeping rough and houseless customer policies.

In practice

As a result of the findings of the 2022 Urban Library Trauma Study, a support group called the Library Worker Support Network was developed (Urban Librarians Unite, n.d., para 1). The idea developed as the researchers determined that library workers felt alone in their experiences of violence, abuse and sexual harassment and that *"peer support groups had the potential to serve as protective factors for library workers"* (Library Worker Support Group, 2020, p. 23).

The intention of the initiative was to provide a monthly online meeting place for library workers at all levels to collaborate and support each other in relation to the challenges posed by serving the public. The support groups were further refined by characteristics such as race, role function or hazard.

Goals for the group were to ensure participants felt heard and valued, creating a space for library workers to talk about challenges, facilitating a community that supports library workers to feel less alone, and reducing incidents of participants feeling negative psychological symptoms (p. 23).

The group provides its documentation online, including a Peer Worker Support Network Training Manual for Peer Leaders. This document contains helpful guidance to conduct peer support meetings, including the meeting order and scripts. It also provides training on core skills such as active listening, group dynamics, trauma 101, the Library trauma cycle, boundary setting and de-escalation techniques (Library Workers Support Network, 2023, p. 3).

LINKS AND RESOURCES

Guide to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld)

Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022

Mentally Healthy Workplaces Toolkit – WorkSafe Qld

People at Work – free Australian psychosocial risk assessment survey

Preventing workplace sexual harassment – guidance for small business

Psychosocial Risk Assessment Tool

Queensland Government Sexual harassment and sex or gender-based harassment fact sheet

Safe Work Australia Hazard Library

Safe Work Australia - Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards in retail - case study

Safe Work Australia - Preventing workplace violence and aggression National guidance material

Safe Work Australia – Resources on workplace mental health

Sexual and gender-based harassment Code of Practice 2023

Violence and aggression incident investigation tool - Office of Industrial Relations

Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld)

Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011 (Qld)

Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice 2021

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